

Pascale Marthine Tayou

(Yaoundé, Cameroon, 1967)

Foreigner, nomad, traveler: these are the definitions that Pascale Marthine Tayou most often uses to describe himself. While today he is one of the most well-known African artists, having participated continuously since the late 1990s in large international exhibitions, Tayou was educated as a lawyer and did not begin exhibiting his work until the mid-1990s, in his native Yaoundé and in Douala (both in Cameroon). He does not acknowledge any influence of Western esthetics, although his works, in which he often uses discarded materials and detritus, can be associated with that of other contemporary “accumulators.” His inspiration comes from everyday life, both African and European, which have merged for him in recent years. Tayou lives and works as a professor in Ghent, Belgium. His relationship between two cultures has been central to his work from his first exhibitions, some of which have been more clearly political, such as his 2003 installation at the Palais-des-Beaux-Arts in Brussels, where he exhibited all fifty-four flags of the nations of Africa, in an attempt to overturn the codes of colonialism. Other installations have been more subtle and personal, such as the village presented at the 2009 Venice Biennale—seven houses in which he mixed typical African elements, dwelling forms, and construction materials with “personages” dressed in Western clothing. His life is the central theme of his stories, always strongly influenced by his background—his “trademark,” as he admits—but also by subsequent experiences, from the spaces where he finds himself to the context in which he works. Tayou considers identity to be something flexible, fluid determined by relationships; it is no accident that he modified his name, Marthin, feminizing it to Marthine, thus avoiding the definition of gender, or of female or male art.

Materials always play an important role in his poetics. Tayou has a particularly free approach, which has often led people to interpret his works as ecological, given his notable use of recycled materials. Our concept of recycling, however, is reductive; Tayou, instead, is inspired by the utilization of materials that characterize the appearance of many African nations, where detritus and scraps acquire a new functionality. This can also be merely esthetic, as in his well-known installation *Plastic Bags*, where he chose the bags more for their shrill and positive colors than for the reference to globalization and modern consumerism.

In *Landscape Tanzanie*, 2011, the “esthetic” use of unusual materials is even more marked. The format is that of a painting, which gives this work, like other similar ones from the same year, a resemblance to non-figurative representation. But the work is characterized by its materials, both foodstuffs, such as chocolate and coffee, and, above all, gold. Tayou thus presents a contradiction, offering a subtle commentary on contemporary society, where precious raw materials do not belong to the countries where they are extracted and grown. (EV)